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ABSTRACT

At-risk students and their nondisabled peers profit from opportunities to make choices about their literacy learning. While not a panacea, experiencing self-determination in school empowers students in ways that will last a lifetime. Literacy educators can encourage a positive momentum in this direction by demonstrating how to select reading materials; providing time during the school day for reading immersion; engaging in read-alouds to expose students to a wider variety of resources than they would experience in their own; and using teacher-made and commercially prepared tape recordings of books. These strategies set the stage for learners to experience success, as they pursue a sense of self-determination. (Contains 14 references and a 10-item list of works of children's literature cited.) (RS)

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Encouraging All Children, Including At-Risk Learners, to Make Choices About Their Literacy Learning

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In his thought-provoking essay "Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Children Decide," Kohn (1993) argues that students' burnout is caused by a lack of power and control over school-related activities. According to Kohn, children are often required to adhere to someone else's rules, curricula, and evaluations, and this externally controlled environment can negate young people's sense of self-determination. Interestingly, when young citizens have opportunities to determine their own course of action, this freedom to choose can positively affect their general well-being, their behavior and values, their academic achievement, and their overall growth and development.

One of our roles as literacy educators, therefore, is to find time each school day for children to make choices about their learning. During the past fifteen years, I have observed elementary school teachers encouraging students' decision-making about a wide variety of engagements. These children demonstrated a voice concerning which books to read, what topics to consider for writing, when to complete assignments, and how to evaluate progress. The whole language movement has nurtured this flexibility by motivating teachers and their children not only to take risks but also to realize the value of these efforts.

Regrettably, this type of learning environment is less evident in special education settings, where teachers and administrators feel pressured to teach basic skills and sub-skills, use direct instruction strategies, develop individualized education programs that highlight the deficit paradigm, and respond to legal issues. Exacerbating these realities are significant time constraints, during which special education teachers are expected to meet these realities and simultaneously to support at-risk students' emotional and personal growth. As one frustrated teacher recently said, "Everything they want us to do can't fit into a typical school day."

Ironically, what appears to be an overwhelmingly negative context actually can provide the impetus for considering a different perspective. Described another way, if

at-risk children are given opportunities to make choices about their literacy learning, they probably will develop the independent skills and strategies needed for responding to expectations in both their academic and personal lives. While not a panacea, experiencing self-determination in school empowers students in ways that will last a lifetime.

Demonstrating How We Choose What We Read

One of the most basic ways of encouraging choice is to give our students opportunities to observe us selecting books and other reading materials. Whether we are teaching in a self-contained setting, a resource room, or an inclusive classroom, our students benefit from watching us demonstrate the joys and frustrations of finding resources that are "right" for us. Specifically, we can browse the shelves of our classroom library or explore the computerized card catalog of the school's LMC. When we locate potentially interesting books or magazines, we can skim the contents, read the first few pages or passages, and determine if these resources are matched with our needs.

During these activities, our students benefit from listening to us think aloud as we wonder about the appropriateness of our choices. For example, if our instructional unit concerns the American Revolution and if we are encouraging students to read about this period of time, we might say, "One of my friends mentioned that James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier wrote stories about the Revolutionary era and that these stories are both interesting and historically accurate. I just found **Jump Ship to Freedom** (1981), and I'm going to read part of it to decide if I like it." Or we might say, "I just read the Colliers' **Jump Ship to Freedom** and really loved it. Now I want to read the other books in the trilogy: **War Comes to Willy Freeman** (1983)and **Who Is Carrie?** (1984)." Then, while we skim the book jackets and read parts of these books,

we should reveal our honest feelings about how the Colliers perform acts of imagination, personalize history, and maintain historical accuracy. Afterward, our students profit from watching us choose our next book in the trilogy to read for pleasure.

A similar scenario can take place with a variety of authentic literature including Avi's **The Fighting Ground** (1984), another poignant story about the American Revolution. Avi's action-packed plot occurs in slightly more than a day, and it is structured by the hour and minute. This type of book provides all children, including at-risk learners, with greater opportunity for having a successful reading experience because they can read an emotionally charged story in manageable segments and simultaneously can respond to a main character's dilemma of making difficult choices in wartime.

As learners become immersed in the Revolutionary era or in other instructional units, individuals may have difficulty selecting books independently. These individuals need support as they attempt to choose reading materials that connect with their interests and reading performance. Without such support, these at-risk readers may continue to select resources that are poorly matched with their literacy needs, and those who encounter such frustration are likely to give up with the book selection process. As literacy educators, we can prevent this variation of learned helplessness by demonstrating specific guidance to individuals or groups. Castle (1994) suggests a six-step plan called "How to Pick a Book by Hand," which I have adapted here for demonstration purposes. Specifically, I can think aloud as I (1) pick a book that I think I can read; (2) open to a page near the middle; (3) read it to myself; (4) hold up a finger for any word I do not know; (5) raise four fingers and a thumb and suggest that the book may be too hard; and (6) repeat the same steps with another page and if the book is still too difficult, select another one.

After showing children how to use this plan, we should give them guided practice in

adapting and applying it to fiction and nonfiction books, chapter books, magazines, pamphlets, illustrated materials, and other available resources in the classroom or school library. Gradually, students gain independence in making appropriate choices, especially when the library collection is well-matched with their interests and strengths and when they are permitted to read their selections in school (Sanacore, 1994, 1996a, 1997).

Providing Time for Reading

Reading immersion during the school day represents a "big-picture" consideration because it stimulates the lifetime reading habit as it gives children another chance to determine if their selections are "right" for them. Meanwhile, we are able to observe their emotional and intellectual transactions with connected text as well as their enjoyment during these transactions. An important benchmark for their choice of material is that they have a pleasurable experience with it.

To support this positive learning environment, our students need time to emulate some of the behaviors that we previously demonstrated. Browsing available resources, sampling their contents, talking about their potential value with peers and the teacher, and eventually choosing a resource are essential aspects of reflection that set the stage for a successful reading experience. In addition, our students are more apt to consider reading as a lifetime activity when we respect their choices and when we give them time to read in school.

As we nurture this momentum, we should not become anxious if our students' reading selections are not associated with literary value. Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) reviewed the reading autobiographies of lifetime readers and found that what the autobiographers remembered often "was the emotional impact of the book, the insights it provided whether for self or others, and the growth that it stimulated in the reading.

The writers of the autobiographies described books as kindling the imagination, creating visions of life's possibilities, giving expression to the readers' own inarticulate feelings, as well as affecting their emotions, intellectual pursuits, and attitudes. In this way, books provide readers with a continuing, evolving view of both themselves and the world" (p.86). Carlsen and Sherrill's findings serve as a continuous reminder to respect children's choices of reading materials because a lifelong desire to read is more likely to be based on personal considerations rather than on literary merits. These findings also help us to realize the value of providing learners, including those at risk of failing, with a literacy-rich environment in which they have access to a wide variety of reading materials and also have time to read for pleasure.

When the classroom library has enough resources written at varied reading and interest levels, we should organize instruction to include pleasurable reading activities. Fortunately, reading immersion is easily incorporated into the language arts block of time, during which children can read books about instructional themes. For example, if the children are focusing on pilgrims, the teacher might present a book talk of Eve Bunting's **How Many Days to America? A Thanksgiving Story** (1988). Then, he or she might provide an appealing display of other books related to the thematic unit on pilgrims, such as Alice Dalgliesh's **The Thanksgiving Story** (1954), Brett Harvey's **Immigrant Girl: Becky of Eldridge Street** (1987), and Patricia Polacco's **The Keeping Quilt** (1988). After introducing these books, the teacher reminds the class that multiple copies of these and other related stories are in the classroom library.

As the children choose books to read and also engage in silent reading, the teacher demonstrates similar behaviors. She or he is not taking attendance, developing lesson plans, correcting tests, or doing other clerical tasks. Instead, students have the opportunity to occasionally glance at their teacher immersed in the reading of a pleasurable book.

At times, however, at-risk children need support in comprehending their selections. The teacher increases their chances of having a successful reading experience by activating and building their prior knowledge of pilgrims. During individual conferences, children profit from thoughtful discussions that connect their experiential backgrounds with the content of their selections. These discussions are especially beneficial when they highlight important concepts in the context of a structured overview, prereading plan, semantic map, or semantic feature analysis. Then, the teacher might encourage students to survey parts of their selections and to ask prediction questions. Individuals who are reading nonfiction books about pilgrims may need additional support to understand the expository patterns that the authors use to present information. Graphic organizers provide a scaffold for grasping such patterns as enumeration, cause-effect, and comparison-contrast. These instructional considerations increase the chances that students will read their books with engaged energy and with meaning.

Toward the end of the language arts block of time, children enjoy a sense of closure concerning their choice of reading materials. Depending on their preferences, they can immerse themselves in writers' workshop and write about poignant story characters and events in their literature journals. They also appreciate opportunities to share the content of their books with peers and with the teacher, and these sharing sessions can take place during whole-class discussions, small-group interactions, and individual conferences. Providing time for these and similar activities reaffirms the value of each student's choice of reading and writing. Moreover, these activities build self-esteem and independence, which are both necessary for creating lifetime readers (Sanacore, 1990).

Reading Aloud

Another way of encouraging children to make choices about their literacy learning is

to expose them to a wider variety of resources than they would experience on their own. Reading aloud to children every day provides such exposure as teachers demonstrate fluency of connected text and show excitement about discovering new ideas through reading. Meanwhile, children benefit from having their imagination aroused, their emotional development nurtured, their attention span stretched, and their reading and writing connections established (Trelease, 1989).

Because reading aloud is often a small part of the instructional period, it is well-matched with the needs of children who, at this stage of their lives, may have limited attending ability. Especially useful are short pieces of authentic literature, including newspaper and magazine articles, poems, short stories, and parts of longer selections. When this type of read-aloud experience takes place daily, it not only creates a supportive atmosphere for other instructional activities but also helps children realize the many possibilities of choice that are available to them.

Regrettably, most of the resources that are read aloud in the United States consist of the narrative (or fiction) style of writing instead of the expository (or nonfiction) mode of discourse. This emphasis on storybook-type activities is understandable as teachers support young children's efforts to develop proficiency and fluency with language; however, even budding readers need a better balance of narrative and expository immersion. This balance gives primary-level children exposure to all kinds of text. Thus, they are more likely to have a smoother literacy transition to upper-elementary and secondary-level education, where they are expected to deal with increasing doses of expository text.

Not surprisingly, both at-risk learners and their nondisabled peers profit immensely from different textual experiences. When we read aloud a variety of resources, we are reaching out to all children and giving them an important message that we care about their interests, strengths, and needs. Meanwhile, we are increasing their awareness

that different types of text can be enjoyable, meaningful, and personally satisfying.

Since reading aloud empowers students by expanding their repertoire for making choices, we should plan this activity carefully. The following suggestions are adapted from Atwell (1987) and Sanacore (1996b, in preparation). Special education and classroom teachers can effectively apply these suggestions, which involve (1) selecting material that they like and believe the children will like; (2) practicing reading the material several times; (3) waiting until the audience is ready, for example, seated and looking at the teacher; (4) motivating the children to be active listeners by having them use the title and illustrations to make predictions; (5) pausing during the read-aloud so that listeners can reflect, confirm or disconfirm their initial predictions, and make other predictions; (6) varying the intonational patterns--pitch, stress, and juncture--as they relate to happiness, sorrow, anger, and other moods in the selection; (7) using sound effects, such as grunting or gasping, and nonverbal behavior, such as frowning, to support the story's intent; (8) maintaining eye contact as much as possible; (9) asking inferential questions after the read-aloud so that students have opportunities to apply insights gained from this experience; and (10) using varied resources to expand children's repertoire of narrative, descriptive, expository, and poetic text. These and comparable suggestions for reading aloud give all students chances to experience a diversity of reading materials and opportunities to make a variety of choices throughout their elementary and secondary school careers.

Using Tape Recordings

Similar to the intent of read-alouds are tape-recorded stories and informational books. When these teacher-made and commercially prepared tapes are available in a classroom listening center, children are more apt to use them. Tompkins and McGee (1993) believe that a listening center is an important aspect of literature-based reading

instruction and that it is useful for both primary-level children and older students. In this setting, learners can use tape recordings as an introduction before reading, as a scaffold for rereading favorite books, or as a support system for learning techniques of oral reading or dramatic reading. Audiocassettes also help students learn about using sound effects, including background music, in their choral reading, storytelling, and readers' theater productions. Tompkins and McGee suggest that children have access to these kinds of tape recordings so they can fulfill different purposes for learning.

Such purposes and related activities are especially important for at-risk readers because they demonstrate uses of fluent language and also motivate the emulation of this behavior. Meanwhile, students with special needs gain confidence in their literacy learning, as they choose more challenging materials that they can read and understand with the backing of tape recordings. For example children with visual discrimination or visual memory or visual tracking problems related to reading would embrace the support of an audiocassette when they are reading William Steig's **Sylvester and the Magic Pebble** (1969). Similarly, physically disabled students who want to read Harper Lee's **To Kill a Mockingbird** (1951) but who cannot hold a bound book would welcome an audiocassette version of the book. Whether our students use tape recordings as read-alongs that accompany actual connected text or as alternative formats for reading, we should make these approaches acceptable and respectable. This honoring of individuals' unique learning needs and styles goes a long way in helping these individuals become independent literacy learners who are comfortable selecting, understanding, and appreciating challenging literature.

What, then, can we do to foster the use of tape-recorded books? Cramer (1994) recommends that the teacher tape record favorite stories during regular read-aloud activities. Then, the tapes and corresponding books are stored in plastic zipper bags and displayed prominently. These resources, of course, become part of the classroom

library. Complementing this instructional direction are Baskin and Harris' (1995) suggestions, which focus on the use of commercially produced audiobooks for secondary school students. Among the available resources are unabridged versions, which provide listeners with authentic literary experiences and simultaneously allow them to read the printed passages. Abridged versions also are available, and they are useful for enticing reluctant and less fluent readers to enter the world of books. In retrospect, tape-recorded books promote more choices for students during their journey toward lifetime literacy.

Making Choices Makes a Difference

At-risk students and their nondisabled peers profit from opportunities to make choices about their literacy learning. We can encourage a positive momentum in this direction by demonstrating how to select reading materials, providing time for reading immersion, engaging in read-alouds, and using teacher-made and commercially prepared tape recordings of books. These strategies set the stage for learners to experience success, as they pursue a sense of self-determination.

Within the space limitations of this paper, I have not highlighted other considerations for supporting children's positive decision making. Among the considerations are matching readers with appropriate partners, guiding children to develop fluency by rereading passages and books, cultivating students' intrinsic desire for self-expression, and giving learners more control over the evaluation of their reading performance. These and other perspectives are useful not only for making successful choices concerning reading, but also for making positive decisions about writing, talking, listening, viewing, and other communication outlets. Classroom teachers and special educators who promote such a context are providing children with literacy-rich benefits that will last a lifetime.

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